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ABSTRACT

The purpose of college teaching is to promote book learning--a type of learning which is repressive of people's natural curiosity. It is the duty of teachers to help students be what they do not want to be; therefore, they need to proceed with charity, affection, and selflessness. In teaching, communication proceeds on three levels: (1) formal academic instruction; (2) moral communication; and (3) subliminal communication. Good teaching should be invisible so that students do not know they are being taught. Students are products of their parents and society; they must be accepted as they come. Teachers are at the mercy of their students' attitudes and knowledge. If students lack basic skills, instruction in higher forms of knowledge must be set aside. A knowledge explosion is occurring which needs to be transmitted to students. The best means for this is through an interdisciplinary approach with a world-wide perspective. This is particularly important in teaching history. History teachers should broaden their studies from a traditional western-oriented perspective to a global perspective. (DC)

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In Honor of Teaching

By Theodore H. Von Laue

It's unusual that somebody about to retire gives a lecture on his own and speaks out without official encouragement, as it were. But since there's so little done or said in honor of teaching, I thought I'd step into the breach and give an account of my own experience. I have taught nearly forty years — I started in the fall of 1943. In honor of teaching, then, I will try to put before you what I've learned about teaching; not to call attention to myself — I'm merely an observer, a witness — but to call attention to issues essential in academic teaching and in the profession that I've followed.

Let me say at the outset that it's been an incredibly privileged time for my generation of teachers. We taught during the high point of American history, the period after the Second World War when American influence around the world was at its peak, and probably at its best, too. Beyond the American scene we saw the height of world prosperity and hope. These years brought universal material progress as well as impressive progress in academic life. The question is: Did I do honor to the opportunities I had?

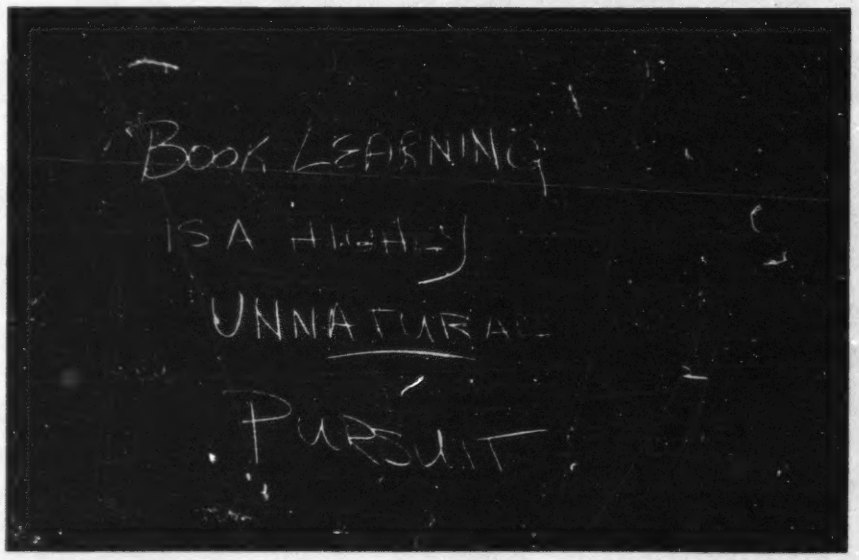
Only lately have I understood my good fortune and acquired the overview that puts my time and career into proper perspective. What I'll say here will reflect these insights in an effort to honor first the academic institution in which I have worked, next the profession of teaching, and finally the teaching of history. In conclusion I'd like to consider the future of teaching in a world that promises to be increasingly grim.

The setting in which I have worked is the liberal arts college, the heart of the university. In that setting, students spend four years between high school and family on the one hand, and the big world and the full responsibilities of their lives on the other. They're halfway between the security of home and the insecurity of life. They are well taken care of by professors and administrators who, while not officially taking the place of parents, still look out for their students' welfare. College students also live in exceedingly privileged and attractive surroundings. Just look out of the windows of the Goddard Library toward the Geography Building; look at the tree-framed expanse of lawn and its landscaped edges; look at the harmonies of the library itself. Do college students take full advantage of their privilege?

Faculty members too are privileged, particularly after they have been tenured. They teach and do their research, free to develop their own minds. They have extensive libraries at their disposal, laboratories, professional contacts at very little risk to their own economic security. They are, for the most part, a self-governing body; the responsibilities by which they live are self-imposed. They are protected from social and political pressures, enjoying immense freedom in following their own personal bent with very few formal obligations. There is also generous material support — everything considered *quite* generous I would say, especially for the humanists, who make a more tenuous contribution to our material welfare. Do faculty members take advantage of their immense privilege?

Let me say next that during my forty years very little has changed in essentials. Student life is still the same; so is the freedom of the faculty. Nevertheless, there has been *some* change. If I may start with my own experience as a member of the class of thirty-nine Princeton University: The training then was far more a training in lifemanship. It was for gentlemen, for people as whole human beings. And the academic subjects were taught within a larger context of moral awareness and responsibility to all of society. We had to go to chapel twice a month; if we didn't there was trouble with the dean. Chapel provided non-sectarian religious education at its best, giving you an awareness of your own spiritual needs and those of the community around you. As college prepared you for life, the non-technical aspects of academic instruction claimed a prominent place. The moral quality of teaching was valued highly, in the lives of the teachers and in their classroom, as a common ethos of a scholarly community.

Since then, education has been secularized along with society as a whole. We have thereby lost touch with the moral earnestness that once characterized undergraduate education. There are many reasons for this change. The most important reason is that life has been too good for us; we've been spoiled. Another reason is the knowledge explosion and the rapid academic expansion that has accompanied it. The past forty years have



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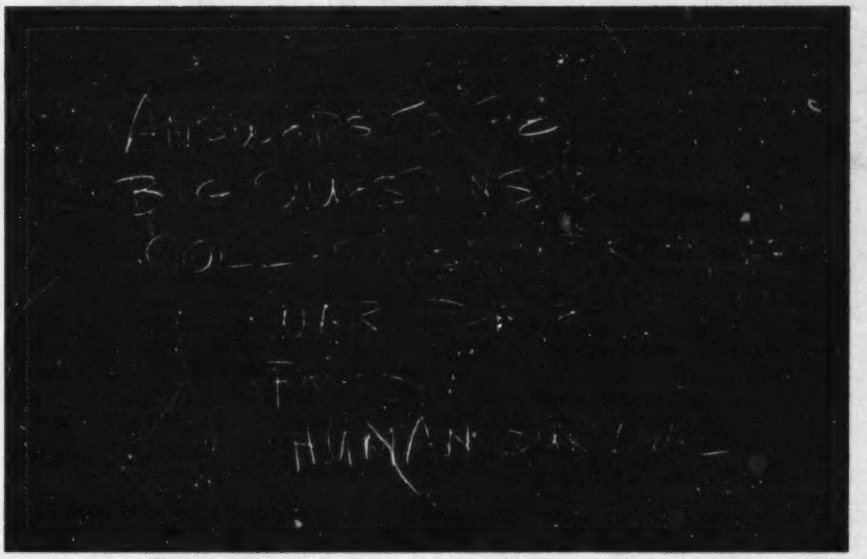
seen an incredible degree of specialization; research has come to the fore at the expense of the moral core of college education.

As a result, intellectual life has become fragmented. The faculty has ceased to be a close-knit company of scholars and has become an assortment of specialists. In addition, we also have experienced a great deal of academic mobility. At the expense of institutional attachment we have become attached to our particular professional group, which, too, has led to the loss of spiritual awareness. On the whole, I would say that in college and in society generally we have lived off a rich spiritual capital, which we have not reinvested, which we have not recreated in ourselves or in our college education.

Colleges and universities, I have implied here, are tied to the character of society as a whole. The college community, I think, is caught in the fragmentation of both the academic world and society; our students are evermore products of that pervasive fragmentation. As a result, the spiritual life, the buoyancy that was there when I graduated, has disappeared for most graduates these days — that feeling that you are in control, in command of yourself; that you have some sense of what makes society go. Today you get your degree and worry about a job.

The greatest change in the college setting, to put these observations into a larger context, has been the collapse of the basic canon of the liberal arts as evolved over centuries of Western history. That canon, which once prevailed up and down the ladders of education, placed a high value on literacy in reading and writing. In the past you could count on your students being literate; it made college teaching easy. College teaching demands literacy and the values and skills derived from it: abstract reasoning, conceptualization, independent cerebration. These qualities are more urgently needed now than ever before. We must therefore try to build in each of our students an active, supple, and observant mind conditioned and guided by intense reading and writing. Unfortunately, the traditional canon of the liberal



arts has been undermined by the globalization of our lives; so has literacy been corroded by T.V.

Speaking of T.V., I recently read an article by some curmudgeon in California who said: "The purpose of a liberal arts education is to defeat T.V." It's a losing battle, I fear. The subversive effects of the electronic revolution have perhaps not quite dawned on college teachers. What will that revolution do to teaching and to the qualities of literacy on which good teaching and civilization as a whole depend?

* * * *

Let me now talk about teaching as I have known it. I would say that teaching is a total process, a complex process of passing on the best of your own knowledge and life experience and relating to the best in your students. Curiosity, the readiness to learn, is the most sacred gift of being alive; you find it particularly powerful among children. As they grow up, that quality is often spoiled or dissipated. I have therefore always felt grateful to parents and teachers who brought us students who still have that quality — a quality to be preserved and nurtured at all costs.

If curiosity is a sacred gift, then teaching is a moral enterprise which requires charity, selflessness, and parental love. But teachers face many obstacles. College teaching is to promote learning, book-learning particularly. And book-learning is a highly unnatural pursuit, seemingly repressive to that sacred curiosity. It is a pursuit that runs counter to the vital energies, and to all the spontaneous impulses, of young people. The aim of such an education is the perfection of literacy as an ascetic practice; it means downgrading the body, controlling emotions, and emphasizing pure cerebration — all at the expense of physical vitality. It means repressing the libidinous self. To be sure, for compensation there should be collegiate sports. But they too are highly disciplined, with an emphasis on restructuring and sublimating that raw vital energy.

As a teacher, then, you are in charge of making students like, or even prefer, that which does not come naturally; you must lead them to the paradox of liberation through self-discipline and psychic sublimation, restructuring that innate curiosity. The more controlled and concentrated we are, the more we see of reality, the greater is our awareness of the world around us. It's a narrow gate that leads to

this liberating self-control, and the resistance to passing through it is great. Passage through this gate leads to the liberating sense of power that comes with control not only over yourself but over the accumulated resources of the world.

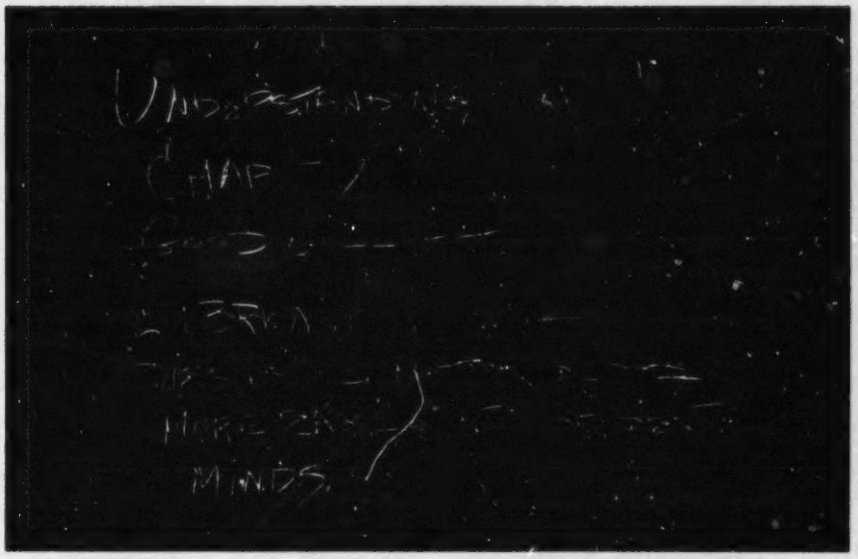
Let me tell you, however, that ushering students through that narrow gate is a hard job. From the teacher's perspective students are always lazy, unmotivated, rebellious, hostile, unsatisfactory. They have to be helped to be what they don't want to be. That's the reason why teachers have to be charitable and proceed with affection and selfless dedication. Teaching is a moral enterprise, in itself an ascetic enslavement for the sake of liberation. To be a good teacher you must be able to like students who don't like book-learning.

And if there are people who think that this kind of moral teaching can be taken over by electronic devices, I say that they are destroying civilization. There is no easier way to knowledge — to civilization — than by squeezing through that narrow gate of heightened self-discipline.

The teaching that leads to self-discipline is a total process involving the teachers' and students' whole being. In teaching, communication proceeds on three levels. The obvious one deals with the formal subjects of academic instruction. Below that comes a second layer of moral communication and moral attitudes: understanding, charity, goodwill. Those are the lubricants on which the subject matter slides more easily into student minds. We take that aspect for granted; we don't usually talk about it. Finally, there exists a psychic dimension, the subliminal communication between teachers and students. That aspect is usually left out of consideration altogether.

That psychic affinity between students and teachers works oddly, as all teachers will agree. Some students are more congenial by their attitudes, their personality, by certain indices you can't really put your finger on. In my case, the students I've been most successful with and felt more congenial toward are students who come from Russian-Jewish backgrounds. There are other types of teachers also for students with different affinities; we need a variegated faculty.

On that third level, the psychic level, we face also the attraction between men and women. Teaching is a form of power,



and power is a most potent aphrodisiac. A teacher always has a special power over students of the opposite sex; that's a very dangerous and treacherous relationship. I've not been above flirting with some of my students — just to interest them in the subject. But at a certain point you have to draw the line. Teaching is an ascetic enterprise; it is high treason to fall from that standard. The teacher is a role model, not only as a teacher conveying factual information, but as a human being who copes with all conditions of life responsibly.

Which also means playing your role pianissimo. I've always thought that good teaching is like good writing. George Orwell described good writing as a craft that is not visible, like a clear window between the reader and the text. My own teaching style follows Orwell's advice on writing. Of course, even if you try to efface yourself, you are still there as expert, role model, and subliminal influence. But what counts is what's to be learned. Your own individuality should deliberately be kept in the background, in teaching as in social existence.

Let me now shift for a moment to the other side of the fence, to the students. Two years ago I prepared an assessment of my students for a conference on the teaching of history. "Here they shuffle into class, some chewing gum — bubble gum at that — many looking bored or sleepy at nine a.m., quite a few late, most of them in an undefined, unfocused state of mind, many of them daydreaming, some worried about jobs or getting into professional school, or merely excited about some sports event. They arrive in a shallow mood, without spiritual culture, ignorant of — or even opposed to — the traditional ceremonies of innocence, taking human experience second-hand from celluloid or the boob tube, their natural subtlety deadened by too much hard rock. They are incapable of reading deeply or even meaningfully, or of any original thought; they don't know how to write. Superficially acquainted with all kinds of cultures around the world, they are ignorant of the rich treasures of their own culture or, often, alienated from them. Taught to look at the world through the eyes of second-rate social scientists and quantifiers, they are over-extended and dulled by their exposure to the infinite variety of life around them. Deep down they are uneasy about themselves and the world in which they have been raised."

I won't defend the sentiments here; I repeat them merely to show that teachers at times fall into negative attitudes about

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their students. In my rational moments — my liberated moments — I realize that, whatever the shortcomings of young people in their collective identity, they are innocent victims and symptoms of the age into which they have been born, reflecting its good as well as its bad sides. They have not yet reached the age of discretion where they can manage their own lives. As products of their parents and society, they must be accepted as they come, for better or worse.

I also suspect that my occasional negative judgments result not only from my doubts about the society in which I live but also from age. Sooner or later teachers face the teaching problems that come with age. As our command of data grows we rise to a more inclusive overview, thereby becoming more abstract as we synthesize larger volumes of information. Students, on the other hand, always live on the groundfloor of life; they must still fill themselves with its fascinating details. They cherish their groundfloor perspectives while their teachers want to raise them to a larger overview.

It has, of course, been a perennial problem: how to reconcile a teacher's pearls of wisdom with the callous indifference of his students. The hard fact is that teachers are always at the porcine mercies of their students. Admittedly, the mercy of students varies; sometimes it is greater, sometimes less. At the moment — after the bitter conflicts of the 1960s and early 70s — we seem to be at a new height of charitableness, of friendly openness.

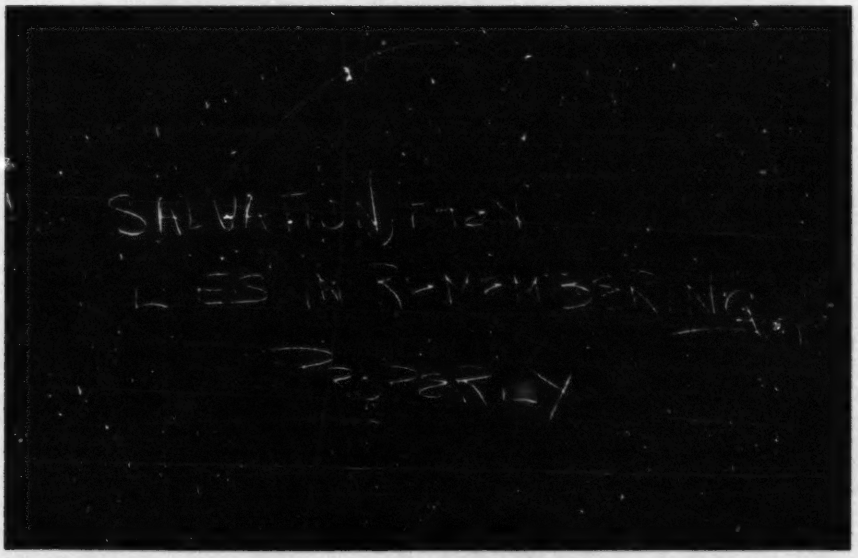
Whatever the mood in the classroom, feeling at the mercy of students naturally puts a teacher under psychological stress. The teacher has to be prepared for every class no matter how he or she feels. Students expect perfection (as out of the T.V. tube); teachers must perform, even when their students, alas, feel no corresponding obligation. And what do you do when the quality of your teaching depends on the quality of student response? What do you do when students don't do their reading? Should you throw them out or coddle them along? I confess that my efforts to win them by kindness have not made all students do their reading.

Depending on student wisdom — or unwisdom — is perhaps one of the most trying conditions of teaching. Teachers are judged by those still incapable of judgment — except in one crucial respect: only *they* know whether you have reached them. Will you then meekly let your students set the pace of your teaching? If you adjust yourself to your students' state of mind, you take time away from teaching your subject just when the knowledge explosion has put a premium on information. How then will you strike a balance between the pace at which your students can learn and the full range of knowledge they should command as educated citizens?

How, furthermore, can you yourself keep up with the knowledge explosion? These days, especially, professors must teach basic skills before they can convey the higher forms of knowledge in which they and their society are interested. In teaching elementary skills they become like high school teachers; their thinking becomes adapted to the simplicities inevitable under the circumstances — which means that they are kept several steps below the level of sophistication that prevails among the leaders in their profession (most of whom don't teach undergraduates). The distance between the college classroom and the frontiers of knowledge becomes wider every year. How then do you keep up with the leaders in your profession and at the same time do justice to your students?

And how, under these circumstances, can you practice the Socratic method of teaching by asking questions? What is the point, if students don't have the information that enables them to give intelligent answers? How can you discuss the big issues of social order, political organization, or economic systems before students know how the world works? Students must learn so many basic facts before they can think constructively. How then can you nurture that sacred curiosity while you schoolmarm your students with basics?

But why even ask these baffling questions when all well-meant efforts among faculty members to discuss teaching problems have always failed? The professional pressures on university faculties stress research or administration duties rather than teaching. Teaching does not advance one's professional status except perhaps within a given institution. The real competition is *between* academic institutions, where achievements are measured by the volume of publications. That downgrad-

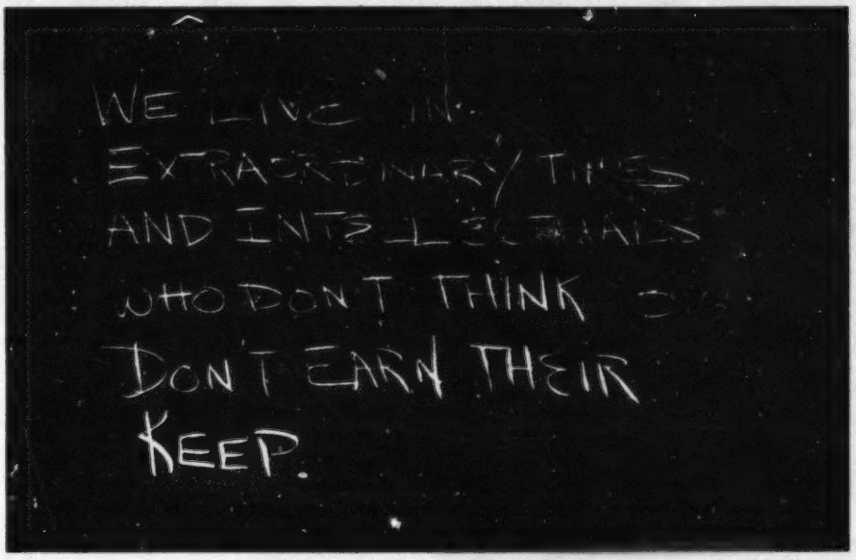


ing of teaching, however, now threatens the very quality of academic education. In the future we need far more discussion of teaching problems: How must we teach the generation of students now coming into college? What are these students like? What are their needs? How can we reach them effectively?

Having no specific answers myself, I advance to the biggest problem we face as teachers: the complexity of a world now grown over our heads. We cannot shrink the world back into the confines of traditional learning according to the Western liberal arts canon. We have to develop a new canon, a new sense of unity rising out of the diversity of the contemporary world. How are we going to do that?

Here I have an answer, at least in general and in utmost brevity. Top priority, it seems, must go to restoring a sense of unity in learning by aiming at a civic comprehension of the whole world in which we live. Admittedly, we have to be specialists in our professional careers; but our fate is determined by what happens in the community at large. The community in which we live is no longer the nation; it is the world as a whole. That world above all needs civic-minded generalists. Within the academic community we should aim, therefore, at interdisciplinary cooperation in setting world-wide perspectives. An experiment of such broad collective enterprise was recently offered at Clark in a course called *Perspectives on Nuclear War*. Other examples may be found in the Science, Technology, and Society Program, or the International Development Program. Similar experiments are possible also within a given discipline. Take, for example, the history course called *America and the World*. There ought to be similar innovations throughout the academic curriculum.

Such innovations, however, require strenuous intellectual pioneering; we must simplify and select while we add new knowledge. We have to throw out much of the old that is still cherished from earlier days and make room for the new. We have to add information and insight about China, Africa, Japan, the U.S.S.R., the non-American world generally; we have to see the world as an interdependent system. We also have to find appropriate values for a global world. Who now is going to take the lead in recasting the liberal arts in order to create a new canon for a global knowledge equipping all of us for survival in this world? Obviously, in expanding our vision, we enter a new intellectual frontier. No consensus exists to guide us. And yet, striking out into that no-man's land is the most urgent task before us.



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Thus I come to the teaching of history. Let me talk about my own experience. I came to history because I grew up in Germany after the First World War, in the Great Depression, and under Hitler. I wanted to understand these momentous events; history seemed to be the only source of knowledge providing all-inclusive answers. That, I think, is the purpose of history at its best: to provide all-inclusive answers to the big questions of collective experience — to war, peace, freedom, and human survival.

History at its best is always civic history, concerned with the fate of the community. Now, obviously, the community is the global world. That world requires a commonly accepted historical framework for individual and collective existence. The collective purpose of community is historically defined: Where do we come from, where are we headed? In Western history, according to the traditional canon, you had a sense of progress; you knew your origins and your destination, implicitly if not explicitly. Now that sense of history has collapsed. We live in a society at odds with itself because we have no sense of historical direction. In the global community we find no common past nor a common future agreeable to all.

Viewed in this light, history is a mix of historical data and interpretation — interpretation based on philosophy, morality, ideology, and the experience of the present with its views of the future. Some of you know the monument in Jerusalem commemorating the victims of the Holocaust which says: "Salvation Lies in the Remembering." You can apply these words to history in general. The essential point is: What is to go into the remembering? Remembering is future-oriented judgment. Salvation, then, lies in remembering properly, so that the living can survive and prosper. Historians, there-

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fore, are — or should be — moralists as well. They are obliged to reconstruct the past in such a manner that they and their public do not perpetuate the hostilities that marred the past. I'm not sure that historians accept this responsibility — with regard to the Holocaust or their classroom teaching generally.

Historians as a professional body, I sometimes think, are at least as conservative as President Reagan. They assume that the Western-centered world order in which they have grown up still persists. By contrast, I hold that we have to think in terms of the larger framework and reconstitute as best we can a sense of civic history geared to the global city. We must first know what the needs of the global present are, and then work up a consensus of what our common past has been, stressing those aspects that make for peace, for human understanding, for reaching into other cultures beyond the limits of our present insights. That's a big job. That's the kind of history I think we should try to teach.

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Let me, in conclusion, give my own views as a historian: In what kind of world do we live, and in what kind of world will we teach in the future? I would say that we live in an age unprecedented in all human experience. Never before have all human beings, regardless of their cultural experience, been packed so closely into an inescapable interdependence. There have been eras of major consolidation in the past, say in the Roman or the Chinese empires. But nothing of the scale that we experience now has ever happened before. That fact has not sunk into our awareness at all; it's a totally new phenomenon.

There is a world system in terms of war and peace, of economic welfare; there's even a common world culture. And yet below these universals the incredible diversity of the past persists in thousands of languages and cultures, all bent on survival. Worked into this contradictory texture is the vast technical knowledge needed to manage this world, to run the United Nations, the multinational corporations, or even the diplomatic service of the United States.

It is as if a whole new, top story has been added to the edifice of our collective life, pressing down on all the others, from family to local government to the nation-state. As Americans we constitute about five percent of all human beings in the world. Our interrelationship with these human beings is our future; it holds life and death, for them as for us. The world has grown over our heads. Very few of us have yet adjusted to that top story; nobody knows yet how to manage it. Nobody can command the incredible diversity of data, knowledge, and insight necessary to run it peacefully.

Moreover, we live in a world of cultural relativism. There's no absolute truth anymore, because for any truth you may cite — any religious truth or political truth — there are examples to the contrary from other parts of the earth. What we consider general truths are often only extensions of the American perspective. We live in a metaphysical chaos, as in a Tower of Babel.

How will people adjust themselves to this world? How will they accomplish the integration of knowledge that enables them to make proper judgments and to incorporate other people's experience into their own? In the past, such readjustment of vision to more inclusive community came only after frightful catastrophes. Only catastrophes prepare people to give up their separate roots and look for more inclusive values. What these catastrophes are going to be in the future, given our nuclear weapons, I would not dare to speculate here.

What would I teach, then, in the face of such a grim future? My model, I would say, is St. Augustine. Following his lead, you change your perspectives from the worldly city in which you live to a City of God. That term "the City of God" may seem to put matters into the dim future of some metaphysical age; that's part of the rhetoric. What counts is that, following St. Augustine, you will readjust your life, saying to yourself: My own life does not matter; what I live for is self-denying service with a perspective extended way beyond my own interests, my own life, my own familiar environment, and taking into account all of humanity, all of creation — God's creation.

In the age of St. Augustine the collapse of the Roman Empire raised people to a new vision, an other-worldly vision that made possible in this world a major enlargement of the scale of community and a heightened intensity of that self-denying ascetic existence which is the essence of the liberal arts as of all the arts of peace on which community is built. If we can rise to that vision in our day, we may yet escape the worst.

Well, I've deliberately preached a pessimistic perspective; if I preached optimism, nobody would change. And change we have to — to a degree unprecedented, unimagined as yet — prodded by adversity, under the threat of nuclear war.

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It's been a long lecture; I've covered a lot of territory, opening huge vistas. I've tried to live up to my motto: "We live in extraordinary times, and intellectuals who do not think big don't earn their keep." Here I've tried to prove that with all my patent imperfections and limitations I have labored to earn my keep as an academic teacher at the height of academic, national, and global prosperity. I hope it has not been in vain. And may I thank, through you, all the generations of students whom I have been privileged to teach. □

Theodore Von Laue came to Clark University in 1970 as the first Jacob and Frances Hiatt Professor of European History, a chair he held for more than twelve years. Author of five books, including Why Lenin? Why Stalin? *(J. B. Lippincott, 1964), Dr. Von Laue remains an active member of the Clark community, currently as professor emeritus.*

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